

ATTAINING STABILITY: A CASE FOR ACCEPTING A NUCLEARIZED IRAN

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ABSTRACT

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Iran is currently viewed by the US as a source of instability within the region. The recent emergence of a more strident Iranian government, apparently pursuing the acquisition of nuclear weapons, has further destabilized the fragile regional environment. The prospect of a nuclear-capable Iran poses a profound threat for both the balance of power in the region and the security of Israel. This paper examines the social-economic-political context driving Iran towards nuclear armament and objectively examines corresponding policy alternatives for the US, Pakistan and other regional actors. It specifically assesses the regional implications of aggressive counter-proliferation actions by the US or Israel and contrasts those with the near-and long-term consequences of accepting a nuclear capable Iran. The paper concludes by recommending that the US focus its efforts on regional development and deterrence vice military counter-proliferation measures, by establishing democratic and liberalized governments in the region. The goals of the strategy would be to surround Iran with successful liberal governments thus influencing Iran towards moderation, deterring

Iran's use of acquired nuclear weapons, reducing and containing its support of terrorism, and limiting the regional impact of its nuclear capability.

ATTAINING STABILITY: A CASE FOR ACCEPTING A NUCLEARIZED IRAN

The US and Iran stand at the cross-roads of a momentous time in history. For many counties in the Middle East and South Asia, perhaps no current relationship portends more potential danger or holds the promise of more hope. Depending upon the actions of both countries, the current antipathy can be assuaged and diffused leading to increased regional stability and prosperity or conversely lead to greater hostility, regional conflict and chaos. The basis for much of the impending crisis is Iran's overt pursuit of a nuclear energy program and its potential application to the development of a nuclear weapons program. This paper examines the social, economic, and political contexts driving Iran towards nuclear armament and examines corresponding policy alternatives for the US, Pakistan and other regional actors. It specifically assesses the potential consequences of aggressive counter-proliferation actions by the US or Israel and contrasts those with the near- and long-term consequences of accepting a nuclear capable Iran.

Background

Geo-strategically Iran occupies an important position in West Asia. Located astride the most important oil transport route in the world, it can control the passage of all oil transiting the Persian Gulf and can also influence the Caspian Sea oil routes. Iran's strategic geographic location, its role as a supplier of oil to world consumers¹ and its vast oil reserves,² have combined to make it a strategically important yet dangerous regional and global actor.

Through a complex interplay of a multitude of geo-political and economic interactions, Iran has become a central actor in regional and global affairs. The recent

emergence of a more strident Iranian government, apparently pursuing the acquisition of nuclear weapons, has further destabilized the fragile Asian and Middle East regional environments and thrust Iran into the forefront of regional and global politics. The prospect of a nuclear-capable Iran taken together with the possible US-Israeli counter-proliferation response it could provoke, poses a profound threat to the balance of power in the region, the oil-based economies of the west, and the security of Israel.

The current Iranian social-political perspective is largely influenced by its recent history. Spurred by the discovery of oil in 1908 by the British and its important strategic location, Iran has since been the object of intense strategic interest and concern by Britain, Russia and the United States. Occupied by both the British and the Russians during both World Wars, Iran became an essential source of oil and, in WWII, an important link in the Allied supply line for providing war materiel to the Soviet Union. Because of its strategic importance, Britain, Russia and the United States have all intervened in Iran's internal affairs.³ They have influenced, and in some cases actively participated in, the change in Iranian governments, the installation of heads of state, the deposition of Iranian rulers, and in 1953, the ousting of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq.⁴ The meddling in the internal affairs of the country, its forcible occupation during both wars, and the perceived exploitation of the Iran's oil resources by the West has created within its population base a deeply held mistrust and hatred for the West in general, and the US and Britain in particular. This came to a head in the late 1970s.

The Iranian revolution began in 1978 and concluded in 1979 with the deposition of the Shah and with Ayatollah Khomeini assuming the position of Supreme Leader and founder of the new Iran Islamic Republic. Shortly thereafter, radical Iranian students

seized the US embassy and held fifty-two US embassy employees hostage for 444 days. The crisis effectively severed diplomatic relations with the US, created an antagonistic US-Iranian relationship, and further fostered and solidified an anti-western conservative Islamist government in Iran. On the heels of the Iranian revolution, Iraq invaded Iran in Sep 1980 and the Iran-Iraq War raged another eight years before finally ending in an uneasy peace agreement in 1988. However, during the war, Iraq had been supported financially by a host of Arab, Warsaw Pact, and European countries as well as by the United States. The support for Iraq during the war further alienated Iran from many of the less radical Arab states and also many western nations. The resulting adversarial and antagonistic relationship between Iran and the US and its closest allies has been reflected in the policies and rhetoric of both Nations' leadership.⁵

Since the Ayatollah Khamenei's death in 1989, there has been a succession of Iranian Presidents who have instituted various policies and, to varying degrees, balanced tensions between government internal reforms/administration and an increasingly conservative and demonstrative Shi'ite clergy. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and subsequent occupation of Iraq by US forces with the sustained conduct of a counter-insurgency campaign (in some cases with US operations directed against Iranian-supported Iraqi Shia militias) has also aggravated and inflamed relations between the countries.⁶ Moreover, Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speech advocating that the Israeli Zionist Regime "vanish from the pages of history"⁷ taken together with Iran's pursuit of a civilian nuclear energy program (which the West fears could lead to a nuclear weapons program) has contributed to the current volatile and precarious regional and global strategic environment. Direct overt action, aggressive

counter-proliferation efforts by the West and the possible response by any one of a number of national actors could ignite a cascading series of events that could spiral into conflicts throughout the Middle East and elsewhere and have a dramatic impact on Pakistan and Asia. It is this threat coupled with Iran's importance as a source of oil that forms the context for the development of a viable strategic approach to Iran's nuclear program.

The Social, Political and Cultural Environment

Iranian social, political, and cultural contexts all combine to present a broad range of strategic factors that will influence the US response to Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program. These factors include:

- Religion is a predominant binding force in the Iranian society, allowing interaction of all classes. Also the domination of the clergy within the society has strengthened the cohesion of all classes of citizens and provides a relatively uniform public perspective on exigent issues with little meaningful internal dissent.⁸
- Central authority in Iran, backed by the clergy, is strong enough to quash any rebellion directed against its ideological boundaries.⁹
- Iranians have been successful in safeguarding their culture. They draw strength from their National character which is reinforced by established customs, art and traditions.¹⁰
- Iran's proximity to the Middle East oil reserves makes it a focal point of international interest. Moreover, Iran's capability to influence the Strait of Hormuz

endangers World economies and is a source of great influence both in the region and worldwide.¹¹

- “Two factors (terrain and water) have controlled the distribution of population in the Iranian heartland. Most settlement has been on the communication routes and in agriculture areas between mountains and deserts.”¹²
- Iran’s harsh terrain insulates large portions of the population, fosters tribalism, and establishes population groupings in peripheral areas and makes these areas prone to external threats.¹³
- Its great geographic expanse creates a problem for achieving national unity, effective administration and defense.¹⁴
- The clergy could marshal public support for the overt development of nuclear weapons for use against “the Zionists.” Iran’s populace will basically support what its clergy and Supreme leader decide to pursue.¹⁵

Iran's Relations with Global and Regional States

United States of America. US – Iran relations have remained very tense and hostile over the past three decades. The US is concerned by the potential negative influence a radical Iran could exercise as a regional power. Iran’s clergy believe that America’s influence increased manifold in Iran during the Shah’s regime and this influence still poses a great danger to Iran’s sovereignty. The US is very critical of Iran’s pursuit of a nuclear program; their backing of terrorist organizations against the West;¹⁶ interference in US stability operations within Iraq; Iranian human rights violations; and Iran’s opposition to US sponsored peace initiatives in the Middle East.

Russia. In the post-Iranian revolution era, the leadership of the Islamic Republic and the leaders of Russia have re-established relations. The two countries continue to strengthen their relationship and cooperate across political, economic, defense and even nuclear areas.¹⁷

China. China and Iran have similar intentions of discouraging extra-regional powers from exercising undue influence in the region. Additionally, during the Iran-Iraq war, China provided some Silk Worm Missiles to Iran.¹⁸ Today China is the fastest growing economy in the world and considers Iran as an important source for its exports and a source of energy for China's growing demands.

Pakistan. Historically, the relations between Pakistan and Iran have been amicable owing to the absence of any territorial disputes and common religious and cultural links. Similarly, both countries have also been beset with hostile neighbors: primarily Iraq for Iran and India for Pakistan. Thus, each country has benefited by a relatively stable and non-threatening relationship with each other. However, the policies of the two countries regarding Afghanistan, Taliban, sectarianism, smuggling of narcotics from Afghanistan, and Pakistan's relation with USA since the 1980's have strained the relations between the two countries.¹⁹ Notwithstanding, friendly relations with Iran have always been a goal of Pakistan's foreign policy.

Afghanistan. The nature of the historical interactions of the two countries continues to shape the current relationship. Afghanistan's population is approximately 20% Shia and the future of this minority has always been a matter of concern for Iranian leadership. The fall of the Taliban provided an opportunity for Iran to gain influence in Afghanistan politics.²⁰

Turkey. The post revolutionary changes in both Iran's international outlook and its foreign policy form much of the basis of Turko-Iranian cooperation. The future relationship between the two countries depends mainly on their internal stability, the Iranian response to Turkey's developing relationship with Central Asian Republic Countries (CARs), and the ability of Iran to exploit the Pan-Turanism affinity.²¹

Saudi Arabia. Iran and Saudi Arabia have a long history of hostility with its roots in religion. In 1802, Wahabis of Saudi Arabia captured the Holy Shiite Shrine of Karbala²² and the acrimony between the two states still exists. Moreover, US presence in and perceived influence with Saudi Arabia increases both suspicion and rancor between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia may view Iran's provocations towards Israel as a subversive effort to marshal Arab support for what may prove to be Shia-specific objectives that can threaten Sunni-dominated Arab states.

India. Realizing convergence of interests, Iran and India have entered into a new era of close collaboration. They demonstrated close cooperation in their combined efforts to combat Taliban forces in Afghanistan. However, India opposes Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology which has somewhat impaired Iran-India relations. Nevertheless, both countries have signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) establishing closer strategic cooperation. India is also developing Iran's Chahbahar Sea Port and is consolidating its strategic presence in Central Asia.²³

Central Asian Republic States (CARs). The CARs comprise an area of growing economic and security importance. The region is also of increasing interest to the US and the west and this has caused concerns with both China and Russia. Iran also considers the CARs of great importance to its national interests. Iranian trade with the

CARs is growing. Iran has made significant trade inroads into Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. "Iran's principal asset is its geographic location and its ability to offer economical access to the outside world to the land locked CAR countries by rail, road, and sea."²⁴

Net Impact of Social, Economic, Political, and Economic Factors

All these factors have combined to generate a fragile and dangerous context for Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons that constrain US policy options.

- The role of the clergy in the internal and external affairs of Iran is strong and appears growing.
- The Iranian oil resources will form the basis of its future leverage with many western and even regional actors. This will be especially true for US allies largely dependent upon Iranian oil imports.
- Iran will continue to have a deep-rooted distrust of the West, harbor a powerful nationalistic and religious sense of independence and non-alignment, and possess an affinity for disenfranchised nations of the Third World, especially those with large populations of Shia citizens. These considerations will help shape Iranian policy and, in many instances, impair relations with the west and with some regional actors.
- Iran will continue to strengthen economic ties and increase co-dependency with the Central Asian States, India, Russia and China. Iran has already established a railway link with Central Asian States that will help exploit the economic trade opportunities with these states.

- Iran feels threatened by US military presence in the Gulf and Afghanistan. As a defense mechanism to this perceived threat, Iran will strengthen relations with China and India as both these countries are likely to emerge as global economic powers and share the Iranian perception of the Gulf region.
- Iran is improving relations with Russia and may become part of an economic block with China and Russia. Iran and Russia may cooperate on the development and exploitation of Caspian Sea oil resources.
- Establishing and maintaining positive Iran-Pakistan relations is important to Iranian regional and global status. An antagonistic Pakistan can further isolate Iran, will undermine Iran-Pakistan collective efforts to thwart growing Indian regional hegemony, and with US-Pakistani cooperation in the GWOT, establish a US-allied presence on its immediate border.
- China will seek to discourage extra-regional powers from exercising influence in the region. Both China and Iran support the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace.²⁵ As both countries regional interests continue to converge, China and Iran are likely to have closer relations in the future. Economic issues will figure prominently in improving Sino-Iranian cooperation.
- Iran will continue to view America as a source of "Imperialist Oppression" and cultural subversion. The global exportation of the American culture, along with its implied indulgent values, is perceived as the greatest threat to Islamic governance and the Iranian way of life.

- Iran will continue its covert and overt support of Shia Muslims all over the world.

This will be a growing source of concern to the Sunni-dominated countries in South Asia and the Middle East.

The above conclusions influence the policy alternatives for responding to Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Perceptions of Iran's Nuclear Program

Iran's pursuit of a nuclear power program portends its development of nuclear weapons and increases the perceived threat. This concern was voiced by the CIA Director in 1996 when he accused Iran "as actively pursuing an indigenous nuclear weapons capability."²⁶ The concern has also been echoed by many think tanks and foreign policy experts. "An Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons would dramatically alter the regional balance of power and would inspire all sorts of potential diplomatic shifts," said John Chipman, head of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). Not only would a nuclear-capable Iran be able to threaten its neighbors, it would extend its implied deterrence to other regional actors and dramatically constrain US activities and future engagements in the region.²⁷ "The 'key timeline' now is how soon Iran could produce 20 to 25 kilograms of highly enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon. "The IISS estimate of 2010 remains valid," Chipman said. "Other estimates of 2009 and even 2008 are within the margin of error, given the number of unknowns."²⁸ Iran, on the other hand, has insisted that it has a burgeoning population, which is likely to reach 90 million by 2025,²⁹ and requires a nuclear energy program (vice weapons) to meet its energy needs and as a hedge against the eventual depletion of its oil reserves.

President Ahmadinejad has announced that Iran would pursue a 'nuclear future' along with rest of the world.³⁰

Concern for an Iranian nuclear weapons program is magnified by how it could or would use those weapons. Iran has exacerbated these concerns with its opposition to the existence of the state of Israel and relatively recent public statements by the President of Iran apparently advocating the destruction of Israel (interpreted as 'wiping Israel off the face of the earth'). However, in an interview with the Iranian President on the sidelines of UN General Assembly Conference session in 2008, Larry King asked him about his controversial statement. The President indicated that he does not have a problem with Jews but rather with the Zionist regime who are the uninvited guests in the region. Although it is a nuanced difference between opposing the government of Israel's claim to a geographical area thus eliminating its "status" as sovereign state within the Middle East, and NOT advocating the destruction of the state and its people, the President's clarification may reflect a moderation of both his rhetoric and Iran's intractable stance against Israel's existence. However, it is the uncertainty and ambiguity of how and if Iran would actually employ a new-found nuclear capability to carry out its opposition to the Zionist State of Israel that is of primary concern to many world nations and what motivates the US and Israel to consider pre-emptive strikes or other military actions to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

The publication in December 2007 of a report by 16 US intelligence agencies concluding that Iran had stopped developing nuclear weapons in 2003 has markedly reduced the tension. According to Mr. Mohamed ElBaradei head of IAEA in a report published in February 2008, Iran is continuing to enrich uranium but has also addressed

almost all questions related to its past nuclear activities.³¹ Nevertheless, the IAEA's overall assessment, together with the US Intelligence report, has widened the diplomatic divide between the US, UK, and France on one hand (who continue to demand tougher punitive measures against Iran) and Russia and China on other hand, who see Iran's attempt to clear up past ambiguities as evidence of the need for further negotiation to resolve the impasse.³²

Another major issue concerns Iranian support for terrorism. In his recent farewell speech to the UN General Assembly, US President George W. Bush again accused Syria and Iran of continued sponsorship of terrorism and went on to say that such activity "has no place in the modern world."³³ Iran has long been accused of state sponsorship of terror over its links to the militant Palestinian groups Hamas, Hezbollah and the Islamic Jihad. Iran reiterates that these parties have legitimate political statuses in Lebanon and Palestine and therefore Iran has the right to support these political entities in their struggle against Israel's tyranny. Britain has also condemned Iran for their role in supporting insurgents in Iraq and providing materiel that is used in frequent roadside bomb attacks on British troops in southern Iraq.³⁴

Regionally, the US believes there is a level of unease among most countries of the Middle East in regards to Iran. The Sunni dominated monarchies are increasingly concerned that Shia dominated Iran will try to dominate the region by appealing to Shiites in such places as Egypt and Middle East. These growing regional concerns are not just among countries with large Shiite population but extend to CARs / Caspian Region as well.³⁵

All the above factors have combined to generate a sense of alarm within the US and Israel and many other western and Gulf nations for Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program, apparent increasing regional hegemony, overt hostility towards Israel, increased covert support for Shia insurgents in Iraq and overt support to other terrorist groups, and support for increased Shia influence within the ME and other Arab/Gulf states. The growing regional tensions could erupt in open conflict with profound consequences.

Counter-Proliferation Military Action

As a response to Iranian aggressive foreign policy posture, there is evidence that the US and Israel are preparing for a pre-emptive military response.³⁶ The immediate goals of the attacks would be to destroy, or at least temporarily derail, Iran's ability to obtain nuclear weapons. The extensive planning efforts are reportedly being supported by on-going combat air reconnaissance flights launched from Afghanistan and Iraq into Iranian airspace. The implied purpose of the flights is to both entice Iranian Air Defense radars to be turned on (thus allowing US pilots to grid the system for future targeting data) and to collect badly needed intelligence on Iran's possible nuclear weapons development sites.³⁷

According to some press reports, the Pentagon has drawn up plans "for massive air strikes against 1200 targets in Iran, designed to annihilate the Iranian Military capability in 3 days."³⁸ The 1000-megawatt nuclear plant Bushehr would also be a likely target of such strikes. The planned US air strike on Iran's nuclear program would likely exceed the scope of the 1981 Israeli attack on the Osiraq nuclear center in Iraq. To be successful, the attack would require a widespread and comprehensive approach

resembling the opening days of the 2003 air campaign against Iraq and employ air strikes from a variety of locations. The probable scope and duration of the attack would likely send shock waves throughout the Arab World with untold short and long term consequences.

Global issues expert Dan Plesch points out that the US has “the capability and the reasons” for an assault on Iranian nuclear facilities. He notes that anyone who thinks US is ‘overextended’ militarily in Iraq ‘misunderstands’ the intent of possible US military action.³⁹ Much of the US’s devastating air and sea power is not committed in Iraq and enough ground forces could be found to secure coastal oilfields and to conduct raids into Iran. Also, in the case of the US deferring solely to Israel for a military response, a recent RAND study notes that “an Israeli action would also have a detrimental effect on popular Iranian opinion of the US, because Iranians would see the attack as having the blessing of the US.”⁴⁰

Opposition to Possible US or Israeli Pre-Emptive Military Action

There is significant international and US domestic opposition for a military action against Iran. For instance, the UN Security Council has failed to reach a consensus on whether even more non-military measures should be pursued against Iran.⁴¹ After the machinations and misgivings on Iraq, the UN is not likely to concede to US-sponsored military action against Iran. Moreover, while the invasion of Iraq was launched by the US and several other coalition partners over widespread opposition within the UN, the US is likely to be wary of initiating another provocative act of war against Iran given the dire consequences of its actions in Iraq. There appears to be a growing recognition within the US that consensus within the international community helps ensure

compelling and unambiguous justification for these sorts of military operations.

Conversely, unilateral action by the US would likely be without UN support and its absence used by opponents to justify military or economic reprisals.

Likewise, a sizable contingent of congressional representatives, intellectuals and US senators has openly opposed any military action against Iran. Many consider that while military action may realize some short term strategic advantages, it could actually destabilize other regional and global strategic environments, seriously harm other US interests, and cause disastrous global and regional strategic consequences. For instance, the US involvement in the deposition of Iranian Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh in 1953 provided some short term advantages for US and Britain through the reinstatement of a more pro-western Shah,⁴² but it likely led directly to the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the alienation of the Iranian population who now harbor an intense distrust and hatred of the US. Concurrently, the rise of influence of Islamic Shism in Iran led to sectarian clashes within Pakistan and Afghanistan which then provoked Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to fund Sunni opposition groups in an attempt to stem the rise of Shism. Pakistan and Afghanistan thus became the battleground of a growing number of Sectarian clashes. These are just a few of the unintended consequences of using 'power politics' within this volatile region.

Similarly, "the President of Iran has proclaimed repeatedly that any attack by the U.S. and Israel (which are now seen largely as one by the Muslim world) would lead to full scale Iranian resistance."⁴³ The means by which Iran has to counter a direct attack on its territory could have dramatic negative economic and political consequences for the US that would likely exceed whatever increased security that a non-nuclear Iran

would provide. Comparably, Iran's economic weapons are immensely more powerful and potentially more damaging than its possession and probable 'deterred use' of nuclear weapons. Indeed, Iran's possession of a nuclear capability could likely drive it to greater levels of transparency (and probably political moderation) since it would become THE likely suspect and target for an overwhelming and technologically superior nuclear retaliatory strike should any nuclear weapon make its way into the hands of a terrorist element and be employed against Israel or the US. Although counter-intuitive, the dire consequences of potential nuclear retaliation appear to constrain and moderate newly established nuclear states rather than embolden them.⁴⁴

While many countries oppose Iranian nuclear armament, the potential consequences of a US-Israeli conventional pre-emptive strike is even less desirable. Turkey and several other regional US allies would be vulnerable to Iranian military retaliation. Turkey is within the range of the current Shahab missile and thus Ankara would be vulnerable as a possible target depending upon whether Iran perceived their actions as supporting the US-Israeli strike or as a potential aggressor following Iranian retaliation. Should Turkey embark on a nuclear program because of the anticipated consequences of a US-Israeli strike, it would place other NATO members in a precarious position and likely further destabilize the region. While unlikely to spur additional nuclear proliferation in the European region, the resulting Turkish nuclear weapons program could also increase tension within the NATO alliance and raise pressure on many of the Gulf States to do the same.⁴⁵ The key point here is that military strikes are not guaranteed to eliminate Iranian nuclear capability so the prospect and danger associated with a non-successful US-Israeli conventional strike coupled

with the expected Iranian response may drive other regional actors towards nuclear armament much more than just dealing with a US-deterred nuclear capable Iran.

Correspondingly, the GCC had earlier opposed any nuclear capability for Iran, even for civilian use, however, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr al Thani, Qatar's prime minister, said: "We can't solve our problems by trying to seal Iran off from the region ... The US should hold direct talks." Additionally, Abdul-Rahman Al-Attiyah, the GCC's secretary general, indicated that the GCC "believe in dialogue to solve the crisis."⁴⁶

Implications for the Expected Iranian Response

Analysts argue that "Iran's best strategy might be to lash out in retaliation." As previously indicated Iran has the capacity to influence events in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Iranian leadership is aware of the threat from the US and/or Israel and is likely taking preparatory measures to secure its program and deter or prevent such an attack. Iran has previously threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz and otherwise prevent oil shipping in the Persian Gulf area if it was attacked. Thus, an attack on Iran could endanger Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq and the entire Middle East global oil supplies.⁴⁸

A military attack on Iran by US/Israel might also initiate conflicts in other related "hot spots" with limited prospects for anything but the temporary cessations of hostilities. Conflict could also involve a resurgence of Shia violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Gaza, and from Hamas elements operating from Syria, Yemen and the Sudan against cooperating Gulf States. The ramifications of regional conflict may vary from high oil prices leading to economic crisis/recession

and/or an outright crash of stock exchanges worldwide. The interruption of the transit of oil tankers and the threatening or actual closure of the Strait of Hormuz could lead to an economic meltdown. Activities of the international terrorist organizations would likely receive renewed support and motivation to target US and Israeli interests worldwide and extremism will gain further strength with obvious adverse consequences for the regional countries...especially those surrounding Iran. Faced with increased violence, Israel would likely resort to additional retaliatory or pre-emptive attacks that further alienate and enflame the Arab world and indefinitely delay any prospects of resolving the Palestinian problem. Within this complex and volatile region, violence oftentimes begets greater violence and instability.

Perhaps the most serious consequence for the region may be the loss of US momentum in initiating a “genuinely democratic and modernizing revolution.”⁴⁹ The Sunnis hold the key towards effecting true reform and transformation within the greater Middle East. Thus, driving the Sunni’s toward the traditional ‘old-order’ represented by Iran’s Shia theology and some of the historical monarchical autocracies with provocative US actions would set-back any transformational gains earned through the US expenditure of blood and treasury in Afghanistan and Iraq. “This Middle East will not be defined by Arab identity or by any particular form of National Government. Ultimately the character of the region will be decided in the crucible of Shia revival and Sunni response to it.”⁵⁰ However the identity of Shia’s are divided across the Muslim world between Arab and Non-Arab states. They have their cultural, political and commercial alliances primarily within the Sunni states. The Sunni and Shia dynamic will play a large role in defining the relations amongst the Middle East countries and the progress of the

region towards democracy, internal reforms and modernity.⁵¹ Overt US/Israeli military action would likely irrevocably damage that fragile dynamic.

Implication for Pakistan

An openly nuclear-armed Iran would not be a primary Pakistani security concern; except that it would likely provoke an Israeli or US military response. That response would have negative consequences for Islamabad which would force it into two major options.

As with the US forays into Afghanistan and Iraq, the Pakistan Government would be under immense US pressure to continue its support for US adventurism that would have negative social, political, military and economic consequences. There would undoubtedly be further demands for Pakistani efforts in the GWOT which would become enormously unpopular with the population and within the Pakistani military (which has a significant and integrated Shia element). As inferred with the setback in the regional Sunni march towards reform, US action and Pakistani cooperation would likely cause civil unrest within Pakistan and serve as a tipping point for catastrophic instability. At a minimum, U.S. operations against yet another Muslim neighbor would most likely erode the fragile Pakistani support for even its current level of participation in the war on terror.⁵² Radicalism within Pakistan would likely grow with obvious ramifications for internal stability. Even in the highly unlikely event that military intervention was successful in destroying the Iranian nuclear program, most within Pakistan would perceive that their nuclear capability would be next; especially in the face of growing internal instability. Similarly, Pakistani continued cooperation with the US would likely place it on an adversarial footing with Iran, create another front for its already stretched

armed forces, and potentially embolden India to exploit Pakistan's increased vulnerability.

The same global impact of Iranian economic measures would also affect Pakistan. Pakistan's economy would be severely affected, as the trade deficit grew even wider due to further increases in the oil prices. Additionally, the ongoing negotiation on the gas pipeline project with the CARs and Iran would receive a serious setback with obvious implications for Pakistan's growing energy needs and economic development. Military strikes against Iran might also entail large-scale movement of refugees across the border into Pakistan and would likely exacerbate an already deteriorating social, political and economic environment.

Pakistan's other possible response also foreshadows dire consequences. Should Pakistan join in what is sure to be an overwhelming Muslim condemnation of US attack and openly support Iran or attempt to maintain neutrality, it would undoubtedly undermine the current counter-terrorism campaign within Pakistan and likely lose the substantial gains made against radical elements within the country. Pakistan would be forced to eject the US military from the country, deny US use of its airspace and bases, and likely sever all military-to-military contacts. US economic and military assistance would be withdrawn and Pakistani nuclear capability subject to renewed scrutiny. Neither option holds much promise for Pakistan's social-political stability or economic well being. For Pakistan, the only viable alternative is for the US itself to seek other non-provocative means to cope with Iran's nuclear program.

Negotiation – A Way Out

Finding alternative strategies for coping with a nuclear-capable Iran can assuage the increased threat posed by its newfound capability and avert the potential consequences of aggressive military action by the US or Israel. The challenge to reaching a negotiated settlement lies not only with the US but also with Iran. Progress needs to begin with both countries recognizing that they stand on the precipice of regional chaos.

Rightly or wrongly, Iran leaders see themselves as surrounded by enemies seeking the Islamic Republic overthrow. They see American military forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey and Persian Gulf; they see hostile Sunnis in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere; they see hostile Arabs to the south and the west; they see hostile Turkic people to the east and north; they see nuclear armed states in India, Pakistan and Israel...When these leaders hear terms like “regime change” and “axis of evil” such rhetoric confirms what they already suspect.⁵³

Correspondingly, the Iranians likely see nuclear weapons as the guarantor of their sovereignty and as the only reliable deterrent from direct attack by both the US and Israel and other potential regional aggressors. Notwithstanding apparent cooperation with the IAEA, Iran will likely continue its course towards first overtly developing a nuclear power program, and then subsequently, posture itself and transition covertly to nuclear armament. Given the above described geo-political context and the general reluctance of the UN to confront these sorts of issues, the responsibility for countering the threat posed by a nuclear-capable Iran will fall to the United States.⁵⁴ Generally, this task will have to be integrated into a larger Middle East strategy that hinges on several lines of operation. First and foremost, the US must objectively pursue a **one state** solution to the Palestinian – Israel issue that includes applying political and economic pressure on Israel and other regional actors. Concurrently, the US must engage in open

dialog with Iran and its neighbors to allay their security concerns and extend its own nuclear response umbrella to those at risk from Iranian capability, while at the same time providing assurances of the inviolability of the sovereignty of those countries aligned with Iran. Likewise, the US should continue to positively reinforce regional actors that make progress towards liberalized and accountable governments while continuing to build on the democratic successes in Afghanistan and Iraq and reinforce the progress in Pakistan. The US nuclear response capability should deter Iranian use of nuclear weapons against a neighbor⁵⁵ while progressively surrounding Iran with democratic and liberal successes.⁵⁶ Thus the US could possibly contain Iranian radicalism and limit the export of terrorism through passive measures directed at creating positive environments in neighboring countries. The visible absence of overt 'Pax Americana' activities should prevent further radicalization of both the governments and the people of the region. A leading practitioner of the art of nuclear deterrence, Sir Michael Quinlan, aptly observed "Better a world with nuclear weapons but no major wars, than one with major war but no nuclear weapons."⁵⁷

In pursuit of this comprehensive strategy, the people of Iran are the center of gravity.⁵⁸ They need to be influenced by positive reform measures that can only be accomplished through indirect efforts, negotiation, compromise and voluntary cooperation. While the Islamic Revolution basically represents a return to an 'old order,' there are clear indications that it could be influenced and revolutionized from within. "In many regards, Iran represents the modern face of Islam. Persian is the third most popular language on the internet (after English and Mandarin Chinese), where one can surf more than 80,000 Iranian blogs. Iranian's are actively engaged in discussions about

western thoughts.”⁵⁹ Additionally, seminaries in Qom have introduced English and Science books and have made great advances in incorporating many aspects of modern education into their curricula.⁶⁰ When peace, security, and economic stability return to this region, then the people within these nations will likely start influencing their governments. The power of the people to bring about change in Iran during the 1979 Revolution can also bring about a similar revolution in accountable and liberalized governance...but the change must come from within.

Conclusions

A US/Israeli military attack on Iranian nuclear infrastructure would likely be the start of a protracted military confrontation. The conflict would probably involve Israel, Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan as well. Although an attack by either state could damage Iran's nuclear development potential, the gains would likely be temporary and the action would probably result in short and long term negative economic and political consequences. To maintain the momentum of its efforts to establish democratic and liberalized governments in the region, the US must adopt an integrated and comprehensive strategy and enter into direct negotiations with Iran and other regional actors. The goals of the strategy would be to make Iran a more moderate nation, deter Iran's use of acquired nuclear weapons, reduce and contain its support of terrorism, and limit the regional impact of its nuclear capability. “The real isolation of revolutionary Iran will come when it is drowned in a larger sea of liberal, accountable governments in the region.”⁶¹

Endnotes

¹ “The US is the largest oil importer in the world, bringing in 13.5 million barrels per day, which accounts 63.5 % of total US daily consumption. Oil from Middle East – specially, the Persian Gulf - accounts for 20 % of US imports and this dependence is growing.” With this much of oil (about one-tenth of the world’s estimated total supply), Iran is certain to play a key role in the global energy equation. In addition, Iran is becoming a major supplier of oil and natural gas to China, and India, thereby giving Tehran additional influence in world affairs. Ariel Cohen, PhD, *The National Security Consequences of Oil dependency*, Heritage lecture no.1021, (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, March 22, 2007), 1.

² Significantly, Iran houses the third largest pool of untapped petroleum in the world, an estimated 136.27 billion barrels, behind the known reserves of only Saudi Arabia and Canada. Keith Crane, Rollie Lal, and Jeffery Martini, *Iran’s Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand; 2008), 67 - 68.

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